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Human Rights and the Refugee Crisis

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Following is an address by Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, before the Tiger Bay Club, Miami, Florida, June 2, 1982.

As you know, I am in charge of the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. As you may not know, in that capacity I am charged with overseeing for the State Department the granting of asylum to people from all around the world who seek asylum in the United States. Both responsibilities—human rights and the asylum aspect of U.S. immigration policy—obviously give me a great deal to do with Latin America and the Caribbean. What I want to do today is talk about our human rights policy and our foreign policy, and, I hope, help explain our views on a number of problems which face south Florida.

Our human rights policy is, basically, easy to explain: We try to improve the respect for human rights in countries around the world, so that we can improve the lives of the people who live there and so that we continue to make clear America's historic commitment to the cause of liberty. Of course, this is easier said than done, for the problem of human rights violations around the world is profoundly complex. The causes of human rights problems vary from race (as in South Africa) to religion (the Ba'hai in Iran), to factional strife (as between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon), to a wide variety of usually military dictatorships. And the kinds of human rights violations vary from denial of free elections to elimination of the free press or freedom of religion, to arbitrary arrests, to torture and murder.

Needless to say, each situation calls for different tactics for an American effort in the area of human rights. Furthermore, our tactics will vary depending on our relationship with the country in question: whether it is a friend or a foe, whether there exists between us distant relations or a dense network of ties. The tools we use range, of course, from straight diplomatic discussions, to public denunciations, to U.N. votes, to denial of economic or military assistance, and so on.

Often this Administration is accused of doing too little for human rights or of "coddling" friendly regimes while we attack enemies. In fact this accusation is false. We use whatever we think will be the most effective tactic. Where we have good diplomatic ties, common sense tells us to use them. Where we do not have friendly relations, but a regime is very sensitive to its public reputation, we find that public discussions and criticisms are most effective, and we use them—as in the case of the Soviet Union. Our goal, in every case, is to be effective, not to give good speeches but to have a good effect in the real world.

If we are to achieve our human rights goals, it is clear that American power and influence are essential. Few governments around the world are greatly moved by preaching from the United States or anyone else. They change their behavior when American power, American assistance, American commitments, persuade them that it is

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in their interest to do so. Above all, the intangible force of the American example as a successful example inevitably affects the willingness of other countries to pay attention to our concerns on human rights. The Reagan Administration has, it is correctly noted, improved relations between our country and such countries as South Africa and South Korea. It is our view that isolating these countries, driving them away from us, would do nothing but decrease our influence there. Our ability to obtain our goals, including our human rights goals, is sufficient only when America is understood to be an important force.

Role of Communism and Soviet Power

Thrown into the many complexities I have mentioned is another major one—the role of communism and Soviet power. Why do I single out communism and the Soviet bloc countries, among all the world's dictatorships?

First, because once a Communist government is established the Soviets make sure that it endures permanently. No efforts by the people of that country will be allowed to win them freedom, as we have just seen in Poland. Unlike Greece, or Spain, or Portugal, which were dictatorships but are now free, today Communist countries are not permitted to leave the grasp of the Soviet Union and seek freedom.

Second, Communist dictatorships are aggressive. Compare Paraguay and Nicaragua, or Haiti and Cuba, or North Vietnam with the now disappeared South Vietnam. Communist countries not only destroy the human rights of their own population but threaten to export repression to their neighbors and around the world. Most recently we have seen this in Afghanistan, and even now Cuba and Nicaragua are engaged in a massive supply of arms to fuel subversion in Central America.

Third, Communist regimes are incredibly brutal. Let me take but one example. The French group, Doctors Without Frontiers, has sent doctors to Afghanistan to help injured Afghans. They have reported, and these items have been published in several of the leading journals in Paris, that the Soviets drop small mines from planes. They don't explode on landing, but only when picked up by a passerby. They are made to look like matchboxes, and some to look like children's toys. The French doctors report that much of their work in hospitals on the border of Pakistan is surgery performed on children who have lost limbs. And of course, even now the Soviet Union is providing chemical and biological weapons to its proxies and allies in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia—the infamous yellow rain which is outlawed by international treaty and by any sense of human decency.

Obviously, we must take care in our human rights policy to make situations better and not worse. South Vietnam under General Thieu, or South Korea today, present serious human rights problems, but they are as nothing compared to their Communist alternatives. We want to be very sure that in a situation such as that in El Salvador, we do not trade the serious but solvable human rights problems of today for a permanent Communist dictatorship. Resisting the expansion of communism is a key human rights goal.

And here again, American influence in the world is essential to our goals. A strong, confident, vigorous America will be able to help countries resist Soviet subversion. And it will provide a powerful alternative model of a successful, confident people whose freedom leads to prosperity and unity. Needless to say, economic and military strength are essential elements in this picture, which is why President Reagan is determined to restore both.

Relevance to Refugee Flows

Now the relevance of all this to the refugee flows you have seen here in south Florida, and to the greater ones you may fear, is I think clear. People do not flee free, prosperous countries. The largest refugee flows of recent years have come from Indochina and Afghanistan, where, quite simply, people are fleeing communism. The same is true of Cuba. Perhaps the greatest source of refugees throughout history has been, not natural disasters, but misgovernment. When governments have destroyed people's rights and freedoms, and have destroyed the economy, people have voted with their feet.

Our response to the refugee problem of today and the potential problems of tomorrow is necessarily complex. Neither we nor any other wealthy country can accept all of the refugees and immigrants who come to our borders. Neither can we accept immigrants who will constitute a servile class, a class of permanently unequal people such as exists in many countries around the world. Yet our response must have in it a substantial amount of humanitarianism, and we are bound (by international treaty and our own law) to grant asylum to genuine refugees who reach our shores.

But humanitarianism alone will not enable us to deal with a ruler such as Fidel Castro, who with unbelievable cynicism uses his own people as a weapon against foreign countries. He shoots streams of refugees at nearby countries in the way a cannonball is shot out of a cannon. Think of the cynicism, think of the viciousness, of a ruler who would take mentally retarded people and drag them off and shove them into boats to be sent away from their home country. Our foreign policy must make it clear that such behavior is simply unacceptable to us and will not ever again be tolerated.

It is obvious, of course, that this country has many immigration problems that have nothing to do with communism, such as the problem of Haitian migrants you face here in south Florida. But our experience has shown that the most serious refugee problems have political causes and—even more important—that these refugee problems develop much more suddenly than those that have their origin in poverty. Compare the steady flow of migrants from Haiti to the sudden waves from Cuba. Thus they present us with a challenge that the international community has trouble preparing for ahead of time.

In fact, it is Communist rule that has caused the greatest refugee flows of recent years. We can, therefore, have a very firm notion of what the expansion of communism to El Salvador and Guatemala would mean. It has the potential to create a Southeast Asian refugee crisis right here on our doorsteps. Indeed, we have every reason to think that the expansion of communism in Central America would create this kind of incredible problem. I am always amazed when people come to me to voice their concern about refugees from El Salvador, yet who oppose the Administration's effort to avoid enlargement of that refugee problem by giving El Salvador the aid it needs to defeat Communist-led guerrillas.

Addressing the Problem

Obviously, the problem of migration and refugee flows is enormously complex, and we must address it in a number of ways. One way is economic assistance. It will help in cases such as Haiti, where poverty leads people to leave home, and it will help in the long run to reduce the opportunities that those seeking political disorder can exploit.

Another way is military assistance. Such aid is essential, for the Soviet Union, through Cuba and now Nicar-

agua, is deeply engaged in promoting and arming subversion in our hemisphere. If we do not help those who wish to fight and defend themselves, then chances of success are greatly diminished. And if they fail, we can predict that many of their countrymen will flee to our shores.

A third way is our human rights policy, where we seek, by the pressure of America's military and economic power and its reputation in the world, to advance the cause of liberty. We seek to bring about political reforms within many friendly countries, and it is an essential part of this policy to oppose the expansion of communism. In a world of democracies, where human rights were respected, refugee flows would virtually disappear.

A fourth way is our effort to stop the illegal flow of aliens to this country. This involves an improvement in our own enforcement mechanisms, including most recently the interdiction program now in effect with regard to Haiti.

Finally, our laws do not, and none of us would wish them to, exclude all aliens. We have been accepting 800,000 immigrants a year, and we have an active asylum program. When someone who is truly fleeing persecution comes to us, we do not want to send him or her back to the land where the persecution occurred. We cooperate through the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the Red Cross, and other international organizations to help the international community deal with refugee flows. And, of course, we do our share in taking care of the world's refugees. We do so financially, and obviously, as in the case of Indochinese and Cubans, we meet our responsibilities and take a leadership role in the international community.

There is one thing that ties all of these efforts together. There is one thing that will help our human rights policy succeed, help friendly governments resist subversion, help create a safer international climate, and help avoid the creation of new refugee flows. It is, quite simply, American influence. There was a time after the Vietnam war when some Americans came to believe that American power was a force for ill in the world, not for good. I believe most Americans have now come to realize this is a false and dangerous view. Anyone who is seeking to promote and defend freedom, anyone who is wondering whether the future will bring economic and political progress in the Caribbean Basin or will bring more subversion, more violence, more poverty, and more refugee flows, will surely understand that American strength is the essential ingredient. A panacea? No, of course, for the world is not that simple. But let us not be deluded by false complexities. This country remains the greatest friend of freedom in the world, and wherever we go—as with Germany and Japan after the Second World War—we attempt to instill democratic values. An expansion of Communist influence in the Caribbean Basin will inevitably create greater refugee flows. As we know, communism combines political repression with economic failure. It is the perfect recipe for the creation of refugees, and we have only to look at the world around us to see that that recipe has worked only too well.

So for you here in south Florida concerned about the potential refugees of the 1980s and 1990s, for those dealing with human rights issues and concerned about how to promote democratic values and procedures abroad, for those concerned about the fate of liberty in the world at large, let us recall again the common thread that links these issues together: a prosperous and strong America, an America willing to maintain its military strength and willing to make clear to friendly nations and to foes the strength of our values and our commitment to defend them. ■

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